DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 406 120 RC 021 021

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TITLE Triple Jeopardy: Disabled, At-Risk, and Living in a Rural Community.
PUB DATE Mar 97
NOTE 9p.; In: Promoting Progress in Times of Change: Rural Communities Leading the Way; see RC 020 986.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; *High Risk Students; Intervention; *Learning Modules; Parent School Relationship; *Rural Education; *Special Education; *Special Education Teachers; Student Characteristics; *Teacher Education
IDENTIFIERS Louisiana

ABSTRACT

A learning module that focuses on problems of at-risk rural students with disabilities was developed for preservice special education teachers at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The module focuses on (1) definitions of "at risk" on the federal and state level; (2) the characteristics associated with at-risk rural special education students, emphasizing child abuse and neglect, depression, suicide attempts, and school dropout; (3) problems associated with teaching these students, including sparse population, lack of transportation, and inadequate social services; (4) federal, state, and local agencies that provide assistance for these students and their families; (5) methods that develop positive parent-professional partnerships, including recognition of parents' strengths and needs and the establishment of communication lines between school and home; (6) academic intervention strategies such as direct instruction, cooperative learning, and peer tutoring; and (7) interdisciplinary intervention approaches utilizing the team efforts of professionals, parents, and rural community members. Over the past 3 years, 781 undergraduate and graduate students have participated in the at-risk module. Graduate students received a more extensive module than undergraduate students. Evaluation responses indicated that participants would use the content and materials, that more time should be provided for module presentation, and that more information concerning at-risk students is desired. Contains 25 references. (TD)

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# TRIPLE JEOPARDY: DISABLED, AT-RISK, AND LIVING IN A RURAL COMMUNITY

The problems facing students with disabilities residing in rural communities extend beyond the school environment. Personal problems experienced by children and youth outside the classroom and school environment tend to have an effect on their ability to learn. These issues combined with living in a sparsely populated rural community, contribute to students with disabilities being at-risk for academic and social failure. Physical, mental, and sexual abuse, neglect, depression and suicide, dropping out of school, adolescent pregnancy, alcohol and substance abuse, unemployed parents, poverty, and rising crime rates are some of the primary difficulties these youngsters may be struggling with on a daily basis (Finn, 1993; Helge, 1990; Sherman, 1992 ).

Further complications arise when children and youth with disabilities live in rural communities. A great number of rural communities have lost their local schools due to consolidation. Furthermore, many rural communities have underfunded their schools due to a shrinking tax base. Therefore, rural schools are unable to provide as many courses and programs as their urban counterparts ( DeYoung 1993; Hodgkinson, 1994; Sherman, 1992). Wages in rural communities for service and manufacturing are usually 25% less than in urban areas (Chynoweth & Campbell, 1992, p.2). This has resulted in young adults moving away to seek better opportunities in metropolitan areas, and the rural community becoming more impoverished and isolated. Children and youth with disabilities living in rural areas are at additional risk of failure in school and society when their rural community is struggling with these problems.

In addition, students with disabilities are even more vulnerable of being at-risk for failure when their special education teacher is not certified and/or is not knowledgeable of the problems these youngsters face on a daily basis. Boe, Cook, Kaufman, & Danielson (1996) indicated that there is a tremendous demand for fully-certified special education teachers. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the demand will be met in the near future. Recruitment and retention of special education teachers for rural school districts is very difficult. Because of a small tax base, many rural school districts offer lower salaries. Therefore qualified teachers usually seek employment in urban areas before resorting to rural areas. Often special education teachers who are hired in rural school districts are younger, have less experience, and possess a Master's Degree less often (Hodgkinson, 1994). Even if teachers are qualified, they soon discover that they were not properly trained to handle the social and emotional problems associated with their students' disabilities (Morgan, 1994). Most special education teacher preparation

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programs focus on theoretical or pedagogical approaches. Therefore little attention is focused on the specific needs that students with disabilities have outside the classroom. Additionally, teachers receive little training regarding the unique challenges that exist in rural communities (Merrell, Pratt, Forbush, Jentzsch, Nelson, Odell, & Smith, 1994).

At-Risk Module Description

A learning module that focuses on the unique problems of at-risk students with disabilities residing in rural communities has been developed for preservice teachers at the undergraduate and graduate levels. This module has been integrated and implemented successfully for the past three years in an introductory special education course. The module has been presented to undergraduate students majoring in special education, elementary and secondary education, and communication and speech disorders. Graduate level students seeking add-on or alternate certification and a master's degree in special education also participate in the learning module.

The At-Risk Module is presented using an expository format. Implementation of the module requires at least one 50 minute class period for undergraduate students and two hours during a three-hour evening period for graduate level students. Before the module is implemented, assessment data is collected on their prior knowledge of teaching at-risk children and youth by answering items on a short objective test. This test requires that students respond to ten true-false statements and complete two short-answer questions. Students are evaluated at the completion of the module to determine mastery of objectives using the same test format. Upon completion of the posttest, students are asked to complete a module evaluation form.

Specifically, the At-Risk Module has six objectives. At the conclusion of the module, preservice teachers will be: (a) knowledgeable of the definition, "at-risk" on the federal and state level, (b) familiar with the characteristics associated with at-risk special education students, (c) knowledgeable of the problems associated with teaching at-risk special education students, (d) familiar with federal, state, and local agencies that provide assistance for at-risk special education students and their families, (e) knowledgeable of methods that develop positive parent/professional partnerships as a source of prevention and intervention, and (f) knowledgeable of academic and interdisciplinary intervention approaches. This learning module also provides information that will increase the student's awareness of the unique barriers to effective service delivery in rural areas. It provides special resources and empirically proven interventions that will insure that additional services can be provided effectively and efficiently.

Components of the At-Risk Module

**Federal and State Definitions.** A review of the literature indicates that there is no precise definition for the term, "at-risk." The Goals 2000: Educate America Act identifies a student who is at-risk as one "who, because of limited English proficiency, poverty, race, geographic location, or economic disadvantage, faces a greater risk of low educational achievement or reduced academic expectations"(U.S. House of Representative Report 102-446, pp.99-100). Other definitions point to students who are not prepared to be employed successfully as adults. Currently being "at-risk" results from certain predisposing factors that affect a student's personal life and behavior, and interacts with the school, its culture, and its practices within the context of the community (Finn, 1993; Helge, 1990; Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989).

Even though there is a general consensus concerning the definition for the term "at-risk," complications arise in identifying children who are at risk at the state level. An examination of five states in the southwestern region (Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, & Texas) indicates that four states adopted definitions of being at-risk if the individual is unable of being a successful participant in life. Texas offers a more specific definition for being at-risk that includes unsatisfactory performance on standardized tests, limited English proficiency, victim of child abuse, delinquent conduct, course failure, and/or homelessness (Texas Education Agency, 1991). Because this learning module was presented in the state of Louisiana, only the state's operational definition and its criteria for identifying children who are at-risk was presented. Operational definitions of the term "at-risk" for any state may be obtained by contacting the state educational agency.

**Characteristics Associated with At-Risk Special Education Students.** A study conducted by the National Rural Development Institute compared incidences of various at-risk student conditions (Helge, 1990). Students with disabilities were identified to be at-risk if they were associated with one or more of the following categories: (a) substance abusers, (b) children experiencing depression, suicide attempts, and/or low self esteem, (c) victims of any type of child abuse, (d) children living in poverty, (e) children of an alcoholic or substance abuser, (f) children in a migrant family, (g) school dropout, (h) sexually active/ pregnant child, (i) children involved in criminal activity, or (j) children from minority and poor backgrounds. Most students at-risk can be linked to more than one of these categories. Typically, low self esteem and/or the existence of a dysfunctional family overlay the other categories.

It should be noted that teachers cannot rely totally on the above characteristics to identify at-risk special education students. Tompkins & Deloney (1994) reported that some students may possess or display one or more of the above at-risk characteristics and require no additional assistance in the school. Other students may exhibit none of these

characteristics and end up dropping out of school. Therefore special educators must take into consideration each student's personality and characteristics before making any type of determination that a student with a disability is at-risk of academic and social failure.

Highlighted in the learning module for preservice teachers is information pertaining to child abuse and neglect, depression/ suicide attempts, and students who drop out of school. Participants receive listed physical and behavioral indicators for all categories of child abuse and neglect, characteristics of depression in children, warning signs indicating that an individual could be suicidal, and characteristics of students who are potential dropouts from school. The listed indicators pertain to children living in rural areas in any region of the United States. Therefore this part of the module can be easily infused into any teacher preparation course. Preservice teachers at the undergraduate and graduate level have received this information.

There are other variables that contribute to special education students being at-risk for academic and social failure. School programs and instructional practices have a direct effect on student success or failure. In addition, the school and community context in which the programs and practices for students at-risk occur may also affect their success or failure. Tompkins & Deloney (1994) identified five rural school and community variables that can have an impact on students who are at-risk. These variables are: (a) generic rural school characteristics, (b) school size, (c) school norms, (d) generic rural community characteristics, and (e) community norms. These variables are discussed at length with preservice teachers at the graduate level.

**Problems Associated With Teaching At-Risk Special Education Students.** Many special education programs face unique problems just because they are located in rural school districts. Helge (1990) reported that vast land areas, sparsely populated areas, lack of transportation, and inadequate social services are just a few of the major obstacles that prevent adequate delivery of special education services. Furthermore, inadequate prenatal care and poor nutrition in impoverished rural areas for children of uneducated teenage mothers intensifies existing problems. Many service providers in rural areas feel isolated from other professionals and from staff development opportunities (Helge, 1990).

Problems associated with service delivery for at-risk special education students are discussed at length with graduate level preservice teachers. Many graduate level students reside in rural communities. Some students are employed as teachers or paraprofessionals in the school of the community where they live. They discuss their experiences and perceptions of rural special education service delivery and the relationship their rural school has developed with the community.

**Resource Availability.** It is generally accepted that having a disability often predisposes a student for being at-risk of academic and social failure.(Helge, 1990). This notion is compounded when the student lives in a sparsely populated rural community. Often special education teachers in rural communities feel unprepared to address some of the personal problems students with disabilities bring to school on a daily basis. Teachers commonly feel inadequate in their ability to assist their students. Often the nearest town that can provide the appropriate service is 30 to 40 miles away. Special education teachers in rural communities can no longer work alone. They must begin forming partnerships with parents, community leaders, and school administrators in accessing resources (Wood, 1992).

Undergraduate and graduate level students are provided a list of national, state, and local organizations that may assist in providing services outside the school environment. National organizations and support groups that are concerned with child abuse and neglect, and depression and suicide in children are highlighted. State service agencies that will assist schools located in the State of Louisiana are provided to participants of this learning module. A separate list of local service agencies located in the surrounding rural areas of the university are also supplied to students. In addition, local and national hotline telephone numbers for individuals seeking assistance with alcohol or drug abuse, a runaway child, homelessness, rape, child abuse, and suicide are included. A separate list of toll-free telephone numbers that provides easy access to specific national charitable and funding organizations (e.g., American Kidney Fund, Exceptional Family Information Network, Hear Now Funding Assistance for Hearing Aids, National Spinal Cord Injury etc.) are included in the provided resource handout. Students also receive a state resource sheet for the State of Louisiana which was provided by the National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY). This fact sheet lists the organization or program name, address, telephone number(s) and contact person who will assist in providing services for children and youth with disabilities.

**Methods To Develop Positive Parent/Professional Partnerships.** The involvement of parents in the design and implementation of educational programs for at-risk children with disabilities residing in rural communities is essential for program success. Capper (1993) stated that low-income parents living in rural communities want to be actively involved in their child's schooling, but they do not have the time nor the energy to participate. Hornby (1989) proposed a model for parent participation based on recognition of parental strengths and needs. Hornby reported that parents commonly demonstrate strengths in their ability to provide information, support, resources, and leadership. Possible areas of parental need are their inability to communicate effectively, be in consistent contact with the school, be knowledgeable of current parenting practices, and be knowledgeable of parent counseling. Models such as Hornby's provides a framework that could increase teachers knowledge of the contributions that parents can

make in developing a positive partnership. Graduate level students participating in the learning module are introduced to Hornsby's proposed model.

Positive parent-teacher partnerships have a significant effect on the amount of support parents give to special education and related services in the rural community. The most important step special education teachers can take in developing positive relationships with parents is to establish solid communication lines between the school and home. (Gartland, 1992; O'Shea, O'Shea, & Nowocien, 1992) . Graduate level students participating in the learning module receive information detailing specific strategies that will promote positive written and telephone communication between teachers and parents (Gartland, 1992).

**Academic and Interdisciplinary Intervention Approaches.** A review of the literature suggests that there are three instructional methods that are empirically proven to bring about positive learning results for students with disabilities in self-contained and regular classroom settings (Larrivee,1989). Numerous studies have found that direct instruction is an effective instructional approach in reading and math for students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers (Carnine & Kinder,1985; Gersten, Becker, Heiry, & White, 1984; Stein & Goldman, 1980). Direct instruction refers to explicit instruction that is planned and presented by the teacher. Concepts are presented in sequential order of difficulty. Teachers model correct behavior, closely monitor student performance, and provide immediate positive corrective feedback during learning activities.

Cooperative learning is another effective and empirically proven instructional approach for teaching at-risk special education students (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). For the purpose of this learning module, cooperative learning has been defined as students working in small groups (three to four members). Teachers serve more as facilitators to group learning. Students are assessed by each other first and then by the teacher.

Peer tutoring is the third approach described to preservice teachers. Greenwood (1991) reported that classwide peer tutoring consistently had positive effects on student academic performance and the attitudes of those who tutored. Teachers have reported that peer tutoring increases their direct teaching time. It also has served as a motivational system for students to become peer tutors (Larrivee, 1989).

The educational approaches just described offer effective instructional assistance. However, effective delivery of services for exceptional students who are at-risk for academic and social failure require more than just the expertise of a special education teacher. It requires the synergistic efforts of a team composed of professionals, parents, and rural community members who can better meet the specific needs of individuals with disabilities. A description of the advantages and disadvantages of team collaboration in rural areas is presented to both graduate and undergraduate students.

Often a team approach may not be advantageous in rural communities. An alternative liaison model may be implemented instead (Morgan, 1994). The liaison model relies on one individual to coordinate and communicate the activities and progress of the student to all team members. Usually the self-appointed liaison is a noninstructional member of the team (e.g., social worker, school counselor, community member). The liaison model can be implemented without additional costs to the rural school district. This model requires more time of one team member. Its greatest disadvantage is that team members do not communicate among each other as they would if all members were meeting at one specified time. The liaison model is introduced to undergraduate and graduate preservice teachers. Again, more details are presented to graduate level students due to their involvement in the schools.

## Conclusion

Over the past three years, 781 undergraduate and graduate students have participated in the At-Risk Module. Evaluation responses have been positive. A majority of the module's participants have stated that they had no prior knowledge of children who were at-risk of school and social failure. Furthermore, they reported that they would be able to use the content and provided materials of the module in their future special education classrooms. Many participants commented that more time should be provided to present the information contained within the module. They also asked for more information concerning students who are at-risk.

This module has provided undergraduate and graduate preservice teachers with valuable information about students with disabilities being at-risk for additional failure in their rural communities. It is clear that students are eager to receive more information about this special population of children and youth. Teacher preparation programs should provide more training for both levels of preservice teachers. Without appropriate training, rural schools and communities will continue to keep their students with disabilities in triple jeopardy.

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